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A decade after Headwaters deal, truce comes to Northern California redwood country

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EUREKA — Chris Heppe climbed the trail at Headwaters Forest as sunlight streamed through the towering redwood trees.

Moisture glistened off a carpet of ferns. The only sound was the bubbling of a nearby stream.

"See that?" he said, pointing to blue paint on an immense redwood 20 feet around and 1,000 years old. "That means it was going to be harvested. Cut down. But they never got to it."

Ten years ago this week, the state and federal government spent \$480 million to buy 7,472 acres from Pacific Lumber and other landowners to create the Headwaters Forest Reserve six miles south of

Eureka. The deal ended one of the most bitter environmental conflicts in California history, pitting blue-collar loggers against tree-sitters in dreadlocks, and establishing

1986 to 2008

Headwaters Forest timeline

Pacific Lumber owner Charles Hurwitz as the greatest eco-villain for U.S. environmental groups since the Exxon Valdez's Capt. Joseph Hazelwood.

Today, the misty forest is a national preserve. Some of its trees are more than 320 feet tall — higher than the Statue of Liberty — and were growing during the Roman empire. But because of concerns over endangered species, the federal government has sharply limited public access, with only one year-round public trail into the forest. There is no visitor center and last year just 10,300 pilgrims came to this wooden cathedral, a fraction of the amount who visit Bay Area beaches on a single sunny weekend.

Still, many believe all the battles and the costs went to a worthy cause.

"It was an intense fight, such a divisive era," said Heppe, manager of Headwaters Forest Reserve for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. "The deal was a key point. It allowed us to move on."

Now the immense forest, 250 miles north of the Bay Area, is beginning a rebirth of sorts. The BLM has been dutifully restoring Headwaters, roughly half of which is composed of untouched virgin timber. The other half was logged at one point or another as far back as the 1880s. BLM crews have eliminated 10 miles of old logging roads. They've conducted regular wildlife surveys for endangered spotted owls, salmon and other species (although it's too soon to see much change in animal numbers, they report). And they have thinned more than 1,000

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acres of small Douglas fir trees to speed the return of massive redwoods.

A new company

"The people of the United States and the people have California have 7,500 acres of the most glorious pristine ancient redwoods protected for all time," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who brokered the deal with Hurwitz. "I would dare anybody to go up the trail and say it wasn't worth it."

Pacific Lumber, shouldered with more than \$700 million in debt, declared bankruptcy in 2007. Parent company Maxxam's stock, \$57 a decade ago, is now about \$5 a share.

During the bankruptcy trial last year, a new company formed by Donald and Doris Fisher, the billionaire San Francisco founders of retailer Gap, acquired all 211,000 acres of Pacific Lumber's land and its historic sawmill in the town of Scotia.

Their new company, Humboldt Redwood, won't cut redwoods larger than 48 inches in diameter that the company estimates date from 1800 or before, said Chairman Sandy Dean. They have banned clear cuts. And their logging level will be about one-fifth of Hurwitz's. Humboldt is an operation with about 220 employees, compared with the 1,600 Pacific Lumber had at its peak. Maxxam did not return calls for this story.

"Our mission is to be good stewards of the land and to run a successful business. We think we have found a good balance," said Dean, a former Goldman Sachs investment banker.

The 1999 Headwaters Agreement was remembered Wednesday with a small ceremony at the forest's edge.

The tenor was relaxed — a far cry from the atmosphere along California's North Coast before the deal. The battle for the last giant redwoods in the 1990s deeply divided Humboldt County, California's leading timber county. Contentious images made national headlines for years. Angry protest marches started not long after 1986, when Houston-based Maxxam, chaired by Hurwitz, took over the family-owned Pacific Lumber with junk bonds from Michael Milken and tripled logging rates to pay off the debt.

Two leaders of the radical environment group Earth First, Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney, were the targets of numerous death threats. Then, in 1990 while the pair drove from Oakland to Santa Cruz looking for recruits to their cause, a pipe bomb explosion ripped apart the car, badly injuring Bari.

Humboldt County sheriff's deputies pepper-sprayed the eyes of screaming young activists who chained themselves together in 1997. And most famous of all was Julia "Butterfly" Hill, who climbed a 180-foot redwood, named it "Luna" and sat there for two years in driving rain and windstorms to stop it from being cut down.

"I dealt with her," said Dan Collings, a former Pacific Lumber logger whose job was to climb up and haul environmental protesters out.

"Julia believed the trees had souls, and maybe personalities. I said, 'Get real, it's a beautiful tree, but you probably have an interesting conversation with your broccoli at dinner, too.' "

Such was the cultural chasm of the time.

"I said to this one Earth First girl in the woods: 'You know, you're an attractive girl, why don't you take a bath?' " Collings, now 51, recalled this week with a chuckle.

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"And she said, 'You'll get used to it. People wash off too much of their natural body oils.' And I was like, that's why God gave us soap!"

Longtime residents remember the redwood battles well.

"We had all these cars with New York license plates, that looked like they were about to break down, with dreadlocks and hippies," said Katherine Harvey, a retired school cafeteria supervisor who has lived in Humboldt County since 1950.

"They would camp here and there. It was a little terrifying for some of the older people. They wanted the mill to stop cutting trees. But my husband built our three-bedroom house with lumber from that mill."

Restricted access

While Birkenstock vegans and cork-booted loggers aren't exactly carpooling together yet, a decade later, a truce has settled over redwood country.

"I think people are glad that the protests are over and everything is more peaceful," Harvey said. "It split the community. But now people are more concerned with the economy and keeping their jobs."

Motorists driving along Highway 101 here now could easily miss the small brown sign that notes the exit for Headwaters Forest Reserve. There hasn't been much built at Headwaters. The BLM has opened only two public trails. None go to the back country where the biggest trees are. One, from the south, is available only by guided tour from May to September. The other entrance, in the north, has a parking lot, a bathroom and a few signs. Visitors must walk five miles to see a small grove of old-growth redwoods.

BLM officials and environmental groups say endangered wildlife, such as coho salmon, the northern spotted owl and the marbled murrelet, a diminutive seabird that nests in old-growth redwoods, would be disturbed if new trails were cut and hikers, horse riders or mountain bikers poured in.

"If you were looking for a place that's a reference point for what a stream in an undisturbed redwood forest should be, that's it," said Paul Mason, deputy director of the California Sierra Club.

"If you start mucking around, carving trails into unstable hillsides that get lots of rain, it is going to have an impact. You have to ask how high a priority is it? I haven't heard people arguing for more access."

A few have. During the process to draw up a management plan in 2003, numerous groups advocated for more access, including the International Mountain Bicycling Association, Back Country Horsemen of California and the California Equestrian Trail & Lands Coalition.

Don Amador, a spokesman for the Blue Ribbon Coalition, a group that advocates for increased motorized access to public lands, said the restrictions were unfair, and "a misuse of over half a billion dollars of taxpayer funds." Those debates linger today, but pale in comparison to the massive shift in the community now under way. Without much left to fight over, the loggers and environmentalists are starting a new era.

In addition to preserving Headwaters Forest, the 1999 deal also gave 50-year protections to 11 "lesser cathedrals" of old-growth redwood nearby and set limits on how Pacific Lumber's remaining lands could be logged.

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This past summer, a few months after Humboldt Redwood took the keys to the mill, Dean, the company's chairman, and its president, Mike Jani, went into the woods and told the last few tree-sitters they wouldn't cut old-growth trees or order clear cuts.

In September, the last two, both 22, came down.

"All the environmentalists I know really want to see this company succeed," said the Sierra Club's Mason. "This is tree-growing country. Humboldt Redwood Co. is making a good-faith effort to do it well. We all use wood products. Let's figure out how we can produce them in a sustainable manner."

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Where are they now?

Charles Hurwitz: Now 68, Hurwitz remains chief executive of Maxxam, the Houston parent company of Pacific Lumber. Maxxam is a shell of its former self, however. Pacific Lumber filed for bankruptcy in 2007 and Maxxam's other major holding, Kaiser Aluminum, went bankrupt in 2002. Maxxam stock, trading at \$57 a share 10 years ago, is now at about \$5. Maxxam owns a greyhound racing track and a horse track in Texas and some residential and commercial property in Puerto Rico, Arizona, Texas and California. Its sales fell 96 percent over the past decade, from \$2.3 billion in 1999 to \$91 million in 2007.

Julia "Butterfly" Hill: The Arkansas native lived in a 180-foot-tall redwood tree she called "Luna" for 738 days to protest Pacific Lumber's old-growth logging. After coming down, she formed a small nonprofit group, Circle of Life, that hosted speaking tours and educational events until closing in 2007. She was the subject of "Butterfly," a documentary film, in 2000, and that same year, the city of Berkeley designated April 2 as "Julia Butterfly Hill Day." A new film about Hill, "Luna," is set to be released next year. Now 35, she lives in Ashland, Ore., and continues to travel and give speeches.

Byron Sher: A former state senator from Palo Alto, Sher, now 81, was instrumental in negotiating the Headwaters Agreement. In February, he was appointed to the governing board of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, the main government agency that regulates development around Lake Tahoe. He lives near Placerville.

Dianne Feinstein: California's senior

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U.S. senator spent dozens of hours negotiating the deal with Hurwitz and teams of lawyers. Now in her 17th year in the Senate, she chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee and was master of ceremonies for Barack Obama's inauguration. Feinstein, 75, says she may be interested in talks to enlarge Headwaters, particularly in purchasing a 1,500-acre property known as "Hole in the Headwaters."

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